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Locke's Relation to Deism

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Chas. J. McGroarty,

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Locke's Relation to Drism.

After the Reformation the Protestants divided into many sects which in turn split up into smaller divisions. This bad result of the sudden change in religion exposed the reformers to the merciless attacks of their opponents the Catholics. The increasing separation of the reformed religion into factions on the face of it seemed to indicate that something was radically wrong and unstable in the foundation upon which the reform was based. The chaotic and unsettled condition of the new religion was due to the gradual renunciation of the creeds and dogmas of the Church. Some agreed with the utmost harmony on the important points in dispute but violently clashed with one another on less significant matters. The most conservative reformers cast aside the articles of the Church teaching which seemed to them the most false and unreasonable; the most radical were disposed to denounce the Church creeds altogether. Besides these were numerous grades of

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religious views which ranged from the extreme conservative to the most radical. These variations in religious standpoints were not confined to Church doctrines and creeds, but were also concerned with the Bible itself. Doubts existed on every hand as to whether the Scriptures had been revealed to us by God. A great many even challenged the truth of the Holy Writ.

Such a state of affairs in religion was appalling to the great thinkers of the time. It was a hard problem to solve. They sought for a means by which to bring concord out of the perplexing confusion. Their aim was to get a common ground upon which the various Protestant sects could come to an understanding. Such was the object of the deists. They saw that men could reach no agreement on any one creed so they rejected all church doctrines as harbingers of falsehood and discord and asserted that there are religious principles which are common to all men. They denied that the Bible is Revelation and held that it was natural

al growth in the development of the human race.

According to Deism, God is an infinite being who is external to the world. He created the world and subjected it to certain laws - the laws of nature. After the creation, the world has gone on in obedience to those laws without any interference on his part. This arrangement allows the world no freedom and makes it the victim of unyielding necessity. If everything worked according to a fixed law the will would have no place. But will is in the universe and is constantly manifesting itself as is seen in the impulsive actions of natural phenomena. Such is the deist's idea of God and his work, namely, a purely intellectual being and a reasoned out world. The deists paid no heed to the commands of authority which ordered every one to accept its dictates whether they appeared reasonable or not. They put their emphasis upon the reason and claimed that the Holy Scriptures and all theology should be submitted

to the test of the reason and be approved by it before being acknowledged as Christian truths.

Deism took on its most radical form in Germany the home of the Reformation for it was there that the strongest protest against the dogmas of the Church was made. In France, the reverse was the case. The original faith and creed was strongly advocated by the Frenchman Bossuet, who was the first one to make an apparently strong argument against the increasing divisions of the reformed religion. Of course Voltaire, Diderot and other French deists are exceptions to the general rule. The first named obtained his rationalistic ideas from John Locke the English philosopher and was fearless in spreading them broadcast. The English thinkers took a middle course between the Free thinkers of Germany and the Conservative ones of France. They denied neither the Bible as Revelation nor the validity of their Church doctrine. Yet at the

same time they asserted that their positions were not mere beliefs based on some groundless argument but that they could be proved as to their truth by the reason itself. The strength of the English theology consisted in the almost unruffled harmony of the Church teaching with the reason.

However some conflict existed between them. This struggle was due to the advancement of new philosophical theories which were at more or less variance with Church doctrines. When this condition of affairs set in, an effort was made to reconcile the God of religion with the God of philosophy. While most Englishmen were bent on sticking tenaciously to the Anglican Church yet they did not object greatly to the standpoint of Rationalism. The tendency of philosophy was in that direction. Hobbes was the first great English philosopher to bring the reason into the foreground of the discussion. His opinions were rather extreme and impracticable at the time and threaten

ed to shake the firm foundation of religious institutions. In the eighteenth century John Locke another English philosopher and the founder of the Empiricistic School of Philosophy was a most conspicuous figure. He exerted wonderful influence both in the fields of philosophy and theology. In philosophy he started from an hypothesis which is opposite to that of Descartes and his School. Up to the time of Locke, the Cartesian philosophy held the commanding place in philosophic thoughts. Descartes began from the standpoint of mind or thought and tried to get at the external world. He could not consistently carry out his position without assuming the existence of God. On the other hand, Locke observing that Descartes had failed in his object, presupposed the existence of an external world and attempted to get back to the mind. He had the same trouble in overcoming the dualism as Descartes and like the French philosopher he had to assume

the existence of God to bridge over the chasm between the two.

Locke's philosophy had much weight in the theological controversies of the age. Although the authority of the Church had been much impugned; it still had influential, strong-minded defenders. The conservatives in religion were unwilling to have extreme religious changes occur. It was Locke's motto that every man should think for himself and that he should accept nothing as Gospel truth until he has given it full consideration. This view of Locke's places him among the radical movers of his time and associates his philosophy with any religious stand which was taken against authority.

Locke's position in the theological controversy is a peculiar one. From one standpoint he seemed to be a most conservative member of the English Church; from the other, a prominent element in the wave of deism. At any rate his philosophy is so full of contradictions that

it makes it difficult to assign him his right place in the development of thought. Locke tried to reconcile this seeming paradox in his thought. According to his own words he was a firm believer in revelation. This statement appears to contradict the assertion that he was a deist. Although he strenuously accepted the teachings of the Bible, yet he had much confidence in the reason as an instrument of knowledge. To prove that he was not inconsistent in the two stands that he took, he made a long and laborious analysis of the Scriptures. in his "Reasonableness of Christianity." He tried to show that they contain nothing contrary to the reason.

In his Essay on the Human Understanding, Locke made a distinction between faith and reason. The former he asserted is based on certainty, that is the deductions of the reason are founded on mathematical demonstration; the latter on probability that is revelation is that which the reason argues

is based on facts which seem likely to happen or exist. Faith, he held, is outside the realm of reason in the field of revelation. Revelation has to do with that reality which the reason cannot fathom or only partially so. As revelation does not come to us through the ideas of sensation and reflection we can not be as sure of it as of the deductions of the reason. Hence we can only believe it. That revelation he maintained, which conflicts with our knowledge must be rejected and declared untrue. Thus the validity of faith depends upon its agreement with the reason.

According to the hypothesis that faith in order to have value for man must undergo the scrutiny of the reason faith and reason will never interfere with one another. This view of Locke's as to the relation between faith and reason is opposed to the opinions of modern thinkers on that subject. They maintain that it is not

natural or psychological that reason should precede faith. Belief rather comes before reason. Man at birth is an ignorant being and even though he may acquire a great deal of knowledge afterwards, he will still be somewhat imperfect. It is quite logical to say that when a man's knowledge is limited he has to take a great many things for granted until he finds reasons for his beliefs. Simply because faith is not based wholly on reasonable grounds, is no argument for saying that it has no value. The feelings, desires, and will enter largely into our faith and give it a necessary and significant place in human experience.

Locke put too much emphasis upon the reason and thus made the process of faith too intellectual and mechanical. Faith rather, is based upon the feelings, desires and will. It is not characteristic of human nature to proceed wholly in a reasoned, calculated sort of way. He took little

or no cognizance of the will upon which modern thinkers place so much stress. According to modern thinkers feeling is much more responsible for our trust in an infinite, all-powerful being than the intellect. Of course we cannot separate the different phases of conscious life from one another yet the reason plays a secondary part to the will in faith.

By means of the reason, Locke also attempted to prove the existence and peculiar nature of a God who is external to and different from the world but who is the cause of it. He held that man is capable of knowing that a God exists and of finding out his qualities. He denied that man has any innate ideas of God but maintained that through the instrumentality of the reason, he arrives at the conclusion that there is a God. After man has been on earth awhile and comes to consciousness, he discovers that he is an imperfect being and

that he is subject to laws which he can not change or abolish. Man reasons that there is a being more powerful than himself who is the cause of his existence and the numberless and manifold processes of nature. Locke regarded it as an absurdity to say that nothing is the cause of something. Since there never was a time when nothing existed, God must be eternal. Next he asserted that God is the most powerful being because all the power, force, and energy which man has must come from the cause which gave him life. If all existence is the work of God all the power which being manifests comes from God. Likewise he said that God is the most intelligent being because all beings who possess knowledge owe their life to him. Knowledge, for God, has always existed since the absence of knowledge can not produce knowledge.

The existence of God, Locke said

can be proved not only by the idea which we have of him but also by the various phenomena of nature. He held that are two kinds of being, thinking and unthinking. We must ascribe thought to God and lower intelligences alone, because matter which contains no thought can not produce thinking beings. He contended that thought is something entirely different and separate from matter. If matter had the power of thought, it would not be a single thinking being but would be composed of an infinite number of thinking beings corresponding to the indivisible particles or atoms which are supposed to be its elements. If God were a material being, he would be identical with an infinite number of gods, or would be the product of incogitative particles. In the one case each god would have a very narrow sphere of action; in the other God would not be the cause of his own existence but would be the result of the motion of infinitely small part.

icles. No particles of matter think because if one thinks, they all think. One particle of matter is of the same nature as another. No relation or combination of atoms, Locke maintained can produce thinking being. If thought be caused by the motion of the atoms, then each atom can not govern itself thoughtfully or be guided by the thought of the whole since thought is not the cause but the result of the motion. An infinite being whose thought is the consequence of the motion of particles of matter would be a blindly acting being - a being which is far below our conception of God. Locke said that matter is not eternal. If it were so we would have to deny the creation and assume matter as co-eternal with God. and hence independent of him as to its origin. He held that we cannot overlook the power of God to make something out of nothing because we do not thoroughly understand his operations.

In the foregoing argument, Locke

endeavored to prove the existence of God by mathematical demonstration. This is the ontological proof which he borrowed from Descartes. The ontological argument asserts that the existence of God is proved by the fact that we have an idea of him. Kant refuted this argument. There is no way by which we can get from the idea to the reality which Locke said was outside of the mind. It is his intention to get at as much reality as possible by means of the reason. He has the utmost confidence in the ability of the reason to solve the mysteries of the universe. In considering reality to be something apart from the phenomenal world Locke made a dualism which he could not reconcile by the ontological argument. By no logical reasoning can we get from the idea to the reality which corresponds to it. In Locke's time, the tendency was to reject the demands of authority and to give the reason more weight.

It was a change in thought which was not accidental but inevitable and based on solid grounds. Of course in this revolution of thought, reason in comparison with the other sides of mental life was emphasized more than was necessary and the feelings, desires, and will were barely looked upon as significant factors in human knowledge. Locke with his keen and powerful mind boldly and sincerely championed this reform in thought which was slowly but surely making its way. Under his skillful guidance, the cause of reason received a great impetus and dominated the English thought of the Eighteenth century and a part of the Nineteenth. Yet Locke strongly objected to the application of the term deism to his work and considered himself as orthodox as any member of the English Church. He acknowledged that the Bible is Revelation but Revelation as he considered it, is based upon the approval

of the reason alone for its value and not on the feelings desires and will. Christianity, he affirmed, is the most reasonable form of religion because it is more conducive to human progress than other kinds of religion. The trouble is he made religion a too "cut and dried" affair and consequently there is not that freedom in it which a true religion demands. Yet Locke did not throw out faith altogether but rather limited it. His criticism of the Bible under the supervision of the reason alone is responsible for that fact.

The logical carrying out of his philosophy, that is his emphasis upon the reason led to deism. The English thinkers who were contemporaries, and successors of Locke finally came to the standpoint of deism. Toland a noted deist claimed to be a disciple and promoter of the fundamental principles of Locke's theology. Locke, however, emphatically denied the relation

ship. In spite of the latter's stand there is a close connection between them. They were both associated with the evolution in philosophical and theological thought. On the one hand, Locke was not ready to give up the Church in which he was reared and did not wish to cast it aside without giving it a chance to defend itself. On the other hand, he recognized the reliability of the reason as an instrument of knowledge and he could not consistently ignore it. In his opinion it was the only means at hand by which we could ascertain the truths of the world. He was positive that there is some truth in the various sects of the Christian religion but he was not convinced that any one of them embodied all the truth. To find out the truth, he subjected the Bible to the test of the reason. He concluded that the Scriptures are reasonable but rejected all creeds dogmas and doctrines.

His strong defence of the reason as the only way to the truth has associated him with the deistical movement. When the chains of authority were broken, reason sprang into prominence not as a mere incidental occurrence but as a logical outcome of the revolution in thought. It was a question which the great thinkers Locke among them could not despise. They had to take up the reins which had been thrown down by their predecessors. Although Locke had taken a very radical step yet he did not give up the old traditions altogether. As a thinker he far surpasses other Englishmen of the Eighteenth century. The effect that he wielded upon English thought was wonderful, powerful, and lasting. Not only was England influenced by his works but other countries as well. Voltaire, the French deist introduced Locke's philosophy into France, and inaugurated social, literary, and political reforms.

Some critics, ^{B.P.} Fisher especially, claim that Locke was not a deist. Their arguments on that point are not very strong. They are based mainly on the fact that Locke was a candid believer in Revelation, and made a strong protest against deism. Fisher's position is all right as far as it goes, but he does not take into account the results which the logical outcome of Locke's philosophy and theology produced.

There is no doubt that Locke was paramount in the Eighteenth century when deism was making such headway. It can not be said that Locke's position, is exactly and fully identical with deism but it can be asserted that he furnished the deists with the start by which they could bring their doctrine more forcibly before the people. Locke did not logically carry out the hypothesis with which he began. He can not be considered a deist in the full sense of the

word. His contemporaries and successors worked out his standpoint fairly well and for that reason are termed deists. Toland and Hume were notable examples.

Locke without doubt is by far the most important and influential figure in the deistical controversy. He wrote with a frankness and conviction which deeply impressed the mass of the English people with his sincerity. Combined with these traits his masterly work - the product of a mighty intellect convinced English thinkers that he would become a potent force in English thought. His genius hastened the development of a new trend of thought which was to come sooner or later. His fellow thinkers took advantage of the opportunities which he presented to them and accomplished many fruitful results. Our man no matter how great he may be, can not do all the work himself, but he can provide the foundation upon which others may

build. This is what Locke did for deism. He made the foundation of the doctrine. but he was not much concerned with the superstructure. Although the foundation does not show up as well as the rest of the building yet it is the most essential part for without it no house can stand. The same is true in the case of phases in the development of thought. If they are not based up on solid ground, they will fall. If the foundation is secured, the rest is easy. Locke started out with a firm foundation but he did not do much work upon it. However he made the task much easier for those who were to take up his work, and his great fame and importance rests on the fact that he furnished the basis for a new and momentous phase in the development of thought, deism.

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